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The Historical Development of the Side-Seat on Horseback

By Boudewijn F. Commandeur

In the history of riding reference is often made to the side-saddle. Yet the side-saddle is only a chapter in the long historical development which must have begun when the horse became a reliable mount. Archeologists put this at about 1500 to 2000 BC. Of course, riding did not start with a saddle of any kind but with the natural seat on the bare-backed horse. When men first mounted a horse, they probably sat astride, because without a saddle this is the more stable seat. Once they had succeeded in training horses to be ridden astride without problems, then the possibility of sitting in a different position could be explored. It is the aim of this article to analyze the essential function of the side-seat and its distinction from the cross-seat.

European Antiquity

The oldest representations of side-seat riding are found in ancient Greek art. About 450 BC the moon-goddess Selene is pictured sitting side-seat on an unbridled horse that is drinking or grazing (fig. 1). However we should not assume that women were always pictured in side-seat. The martial female tribe of the Amazons is always represented astride. A silver panel from circa 545 BC shows two Amazon women fighting with lance and catapult on horseback, riding astride (fig. 2). In fact, in ancient Greece, common women did not ride horses at all, but were carried in



Fig. 1
Moon goddess Selene on a red figured Greek vase. ca 450 BC
Museo Egizio de Etrusco, Florence

carts and wagons. Women and girls of that era who did not cater to convention may also have ridden side-seat; certainly, it seems difficult for the Greek women with their long ankle-length gowns to have ridden cross-seat. Obviously there was an inducement to represent women in side-seat for the artists of that time to have created such works. It is important to realize, however, that men and gods were also sometimes represented side-seat. For example, on vase paintings the crippled blacksmith of the gods, Hephaestus, is pictured sitting on a mule in side-seat.

Roman antiquity has left us even fewer representations of men or women riding side-seat. The only common illustrations are bronzes or stone carvings of the Gallic goddess Epona. She mostly used the side-seat, but can also be found seated astride. As she was the goddess of the equines and their owners and grooms, we may assume she was fully experienced with horses and that both seating positions were familiar to her.

Asian Culture

From the Greek classical world we go to Japan in the seventh century. Here we find a historical fact that has great importance in the history of riding by men and women. In 682 the Emperor Temmu issued an order that henceforth everybody, men and women alike, must tie up their hair. At the same time tradition says women also adapted their way of sitting on horseback to the same way as the men. This meant that from then on women preferred the cross-seat to the side-seat. However, the order to tie up the hair does not seem to have been completely satisfactory.

Two years later the Emperor revised his order and declared that henceforward women over 40 years old could decide for themselves whether they wanted to tie up their hair or not, and whether they preferred to ride side-seat or cross-seat. A more decisive proof that both ways of sitting on horseback were in practice from early history on is hard to imagine.

Afterwards, at least in Japan and other parts of Asia, the side-seat position apparently fell into disuse. Numerous statuettes of women on horseback from the Tang period (618-907) in China have been preserved, but there is not one riding in side-saddle. In those days women even played polo sitting astride. It is striking how the conception of female activities has changed over the centuries since nowadays polo is considered a typical male sport.

In other Asian countries women are rarely represented on horseback, however, if they are, it is always in cross-seat. Persian miniatures show many men but rarely women on horseback. The custom if Islam did not encourage women to ride, but on works of art from non-Islamic countries women riders are scarce too.

A beautiful example from India is the painting of Baz Bahadur, Prince of Malwa, riding with his wife Rupmati in the moonlight (ca. 1770). Both are riding astride their horses (fig. 3).

Summarizing, it appears that in Asian countries the side-seat was used originally, but not after the seventh century.

Medieval Europe

In order to analyze how the side-seat developed, we go back to the European Middle Ages. On the ivory lid of a box from Germany (ca. 1350), we see two young lovers hawking together. Both are simply dressed and the girl rides in cross-seat like her lover (fig. 4). In a French manuscript from circa 1425 we find a company of fashionably dressed ladies and gentlemen on horseback (fig. 5). It is very clear the ladies are seated sideways, at an angle of 90 degrees to the horse's back. We compare this picture with the cavalcade of the month of May in the book of hours, *Les Tres Riches Heures du Duc de Berry* (fig. 6), painted about 1450. In this pageant of richly dressed ladies and gentlemen, the ladies are also



Fig. 2
Two Amazons in cross seat on a silver relief panel. Etruscan
ca 575 BC
British Museum, London

seated in side-seat. Close study of the illustration reveals that the ladies are seated in a different position from the previous picture. Their seat has moved to an angle of 45 degrees to the horse's back and their knees are held higher, at approximately the height of the withers. With this series of pictures we have reached a turning point in the history of the side-seat.

In this position the transition from common saddle to adapted side-saddle appears to have taken place. The seat of the ladies in the miniature from 1425 is characteristic of a common saddle on which one is seated with both legs on one side. These ladies cannot see in which direction their horses are going because their legs are completely at right angles to the horse and they cannot look ahead with the horse. In the representation of the cavalcade from 1450 a change has taken place. Here the ladies are seen looking almost in the same direction as the horse. This is possible because their right thigh is now above the saddle instead of to the left of it. Unfortunately, we cannot see which adaption of the saddle enabled the ladies to take this position as their long gowns cover the saddle completely. It is likely they had learned to make use of the pommel, which distinguished fifteenth century saddles from fourteenth century ones. When the lady placed her right leg to the right of the pommel and let her left foot rest on the planchette, so that the left leg is close to the right leg, then she is in the position pictured in the cavalcade of ca. 1450.

This change was an important improvement for riding in side-seat, although a true side-saddle did not yet exist. Nevertheless, a development had started that led to development of a saddle for women. This development is shown on an etching of Albrecht Durer from 1497 (fig. 7). A lady, escorted by her squire, rides a horse in side-seat. We look

at the horse from the right-hand side and can see the lady looking to the right without any special effort. Hence, the upper part of her body is straight above the saddle, otherwise turning her body to the right would be difficult. Furthermore, we can see her right leg lying against a crutch on the saddle. Since this crutch is visible, it cannot be the pommel to the right, the one which the lady of the miniature from 1450 put her right leg against. The position of Durer's lady from 1497 is completely straight while the ladies from 1450 have their bodies still turned slightly to the left and the ladies from 1425 are turned even more to the left.

This sequence of pictures suggests a remarkable development in cultural and technological history.

The invention of the true side-saddle is traditionally credited to a variety of royal ladies. The first one mentioned in the literature is Anna of Bohemia, wife of the English King Richard II. John Stow reported (in 1580) that she introduced side-saddle into Britain around 1380, but what kind of saddle unfortunately has not yet been traced. Maria of Burgundy (1457-1482), wife of Emperor Maximilian I of Austria, is shown on her personal seal riding on a sort of side-saddle. Brantome, the contemporary biographer of

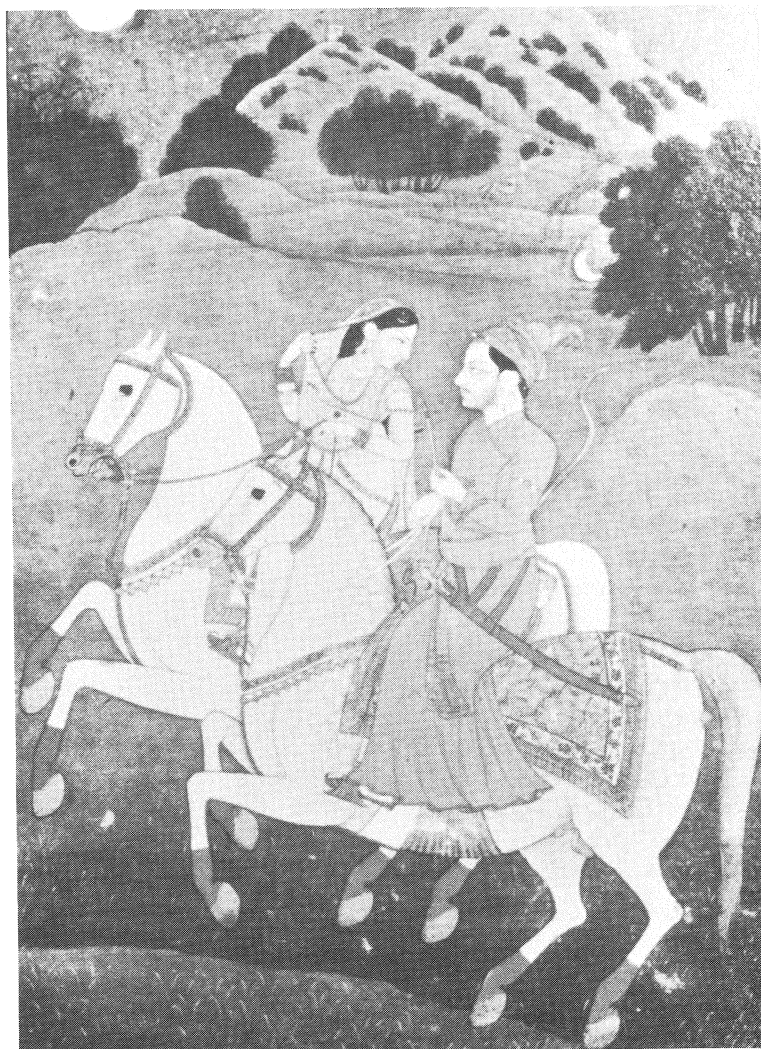


Fig. 3
Prince Baz Bahadur and his wife Rupmati riding in the moonlight. ca 1770
British Museum, London

many noble ladies of the 16th century, is reported to describe Catherine de Medici (1519-1589), wife of Henry II of France, as the first one to put her right leg in a U-shaped support of the saddle. Brantome had, apparently, not seen Dürer's etching from 1497!

More original literature research might reveal what the innovations of these royal ladies have really been. While literature and tradition give very confusing and unreliable information, on the basis of the illustrations shown here it may be justifiable to conclude that in the period circa 1425-1497 the transition from sitting transversely on a common saddle to using an especially adapted saddle must have taken place. Catherine de Medici may have adapted the side-seat somewhat but has certainly not invented the side-seat or the side-saddle. As a leading lady she might, however, have had a certain local influence on the way her retinue rode on horseback.

Side-seat and cross-seat

A different aspect of riding side-seat can be found in representations of ladies riding in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Both the side-seat and the cross-seat were used depending upon the situation and the purpose of the ride. To illustrate both methods we introduce here two contrasting royal personalities: Christina of Sweden and Wilhelmina of Prussia.

Christina, once queen of Sweden, abdicated in 1654 at the age of 28. She took time to travel in other European countries and liked to impress people with pomp and extravagancies. In 1655 she made her entrance to Rome, in 1656 to Paris. On both occasions she rode in side-seat on a grey horse, in exemplary position, with heavily decorated saddlecloth, her whole appearance designed to emphasize her dignity. The side-seat was considered very appropriate for this purpose. The situation of Princess Wilhelmina of Prussia was quite different.

She was the wife of Governor William V of Holland. This lady is known because of her energetic efforts to restore her husband to his position as Governor, from which he had been dismissed by the Estates of Holland. With the intention of appealing the dismissal, Wilhelmina rode from Berlin to The Hague (420 miles), but was stopped near Gouda just before reaching The Hague and was subsequently sent back to Berlin (1787). Her action failed, although it was a brave enterprise. Princess Wilhelmina has often been portrayed in her own time, and invariably she is dressed in simple attire and

riding astride. She was obviously used to riding her horse actively and in difficult situations. She took the cross-seat, showing us this was the most suitable method in her situation, so different from Christina's circumstances.



Fig. 4
Young man and girl hawking. Carved in the ivory lid of a box. German, Rhineland ca 1350
Victoria and Albert Museum, London

Part II

Development of the Side-Seat in the Victorian Era

In the 19th century another turning point was reached in the development of the riding position for women. In previous centuries a woman's choice between cross-seat and side-seat, depended on the use she wished to make of the horse. But this was to change in the course of the 19th century in Europe. The influence of Victorian style and views extended also to ladies riding horses. Women, or at least ladies, were treated with, what seems to us, exaggerated veneration and prudishness. It was not fitting for ladies to ride a horse in the same way as a man. On horseback she had to have a special position, and for

this purpose the side-seat was most suitable. Several 'reasons' were proposed to demonstrate the necessity for women to ride in side-saddle. The famous French dressage-horse trainer and instructor James Fillis wrote, in his book *Principes de Dressages et d'Equitation* (1890), that the side-seat was necessary for women, "As they have round and weak thighs, women can never develop a firm seat on the cross-saddle." Jules-Théodore Pellier says in his book *La Selle et le Costume de l'Amazone* (1897), "the side-seat is more elegant, gives the woman-rider a reassuringly firm position, and is the most satisfying from the viewpoint of decency."

Final Adaptation of the Side-Saddle and Riding by Women

In the 18th and 19th centuries improvements were made in the side-saddle which appear to be the final stages of development. In the beginning of the 18th century the side-saddle still had the U-shape pommel. In "Le Nouveau Parfait Maréchal" (1741) by Francois-Alexandre de Garsault we find for the first time a description of a different construction. The u-shape pommel has been replaced by a left crutch bent forward, and a right one bent to the right, both crutches close to each other on the axis. The right leg was positioned on top of the right crutch and



Fig. 5
Miniature of a company of ladies and gentlemen on horseback. ca 1425
Harley Manuscript 4431, f.81 British Museum, London.

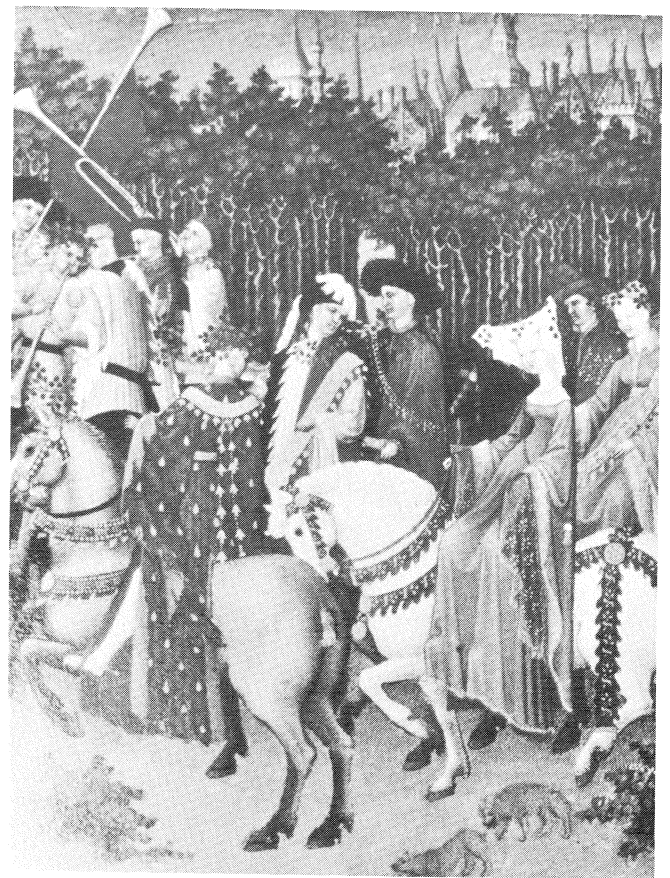


Fig. 6
Cavalcade in May. Miniature from the book of hours *Les Tres Riches Heures du Duc de Berry*. ca 1450
Musee Conde, Chantilly

under the left crutch. The intention was, of course, to give the right leg a firmer position. At the same time, De Garsault described and illustrated the *plancette* as replaced by a real stirrup to support the left leg. Furthermore, a cushion was attached between the lady's right leg and the withers of the horse and in front of the saddle. We can see this type of saddle in a water-colour by Théodore Géricault (1791-1824) (fig. 8). The crutch bent to the right can be seen clearly, as can the cushion on the withers of the horse. The other crutch bent forward is hidden behind the lady's knee. Yet this essential 18th century side-saddle was still not the definitive model, and even the saddles with the u-shape pommel were still in use for some time.

About 1830 a modified construction became available, probably invented by Jules-Charles Pellier (Ca. 1800 - ca. 1875), the father of Jules-Théodore Pellier. He placed a third crutch on the left side of the saddle, about twenty centimeters below the U-shape pommel. The lady's left thigh would just touch the underside of this third crutch, provided the stirrup-leather was the right length. It is not quite clear whether Pellier is the sole inventor of the third crutch because Francois Baucher also claimed this invention. The two riding masters had worked together and they may have designed this improvement of the saddle jointly. The third crutch went out of style and was replaced by the construction still in use today. The U-shape pommel became a single crutch, somewhat left from the axis of the saddle and bent to the right. The third crutch was moved upwards and placed close to the other one and bent to the left. In this way we have two crutches leaning against each other which together form a V.

These changes in the construction of the side-saddle have enabled the 19th and 20th century woman to ride more actively and to control her horse, changing the traditional passive position of the side-seat into a more active one. In

France the leading riding teachers of the 19th century, such as De Pons d'Hostun (1806), Henry Lenoble (1826), P.A. Aubert (1842), and Jules-Théodore Pellier (1897), wrote riding manuals for ladies.

Even if their teaching may have preceded the real development of active riding in side-saddle, it is clear the 19th century lady became interested in more than just being transported on horseback. She had

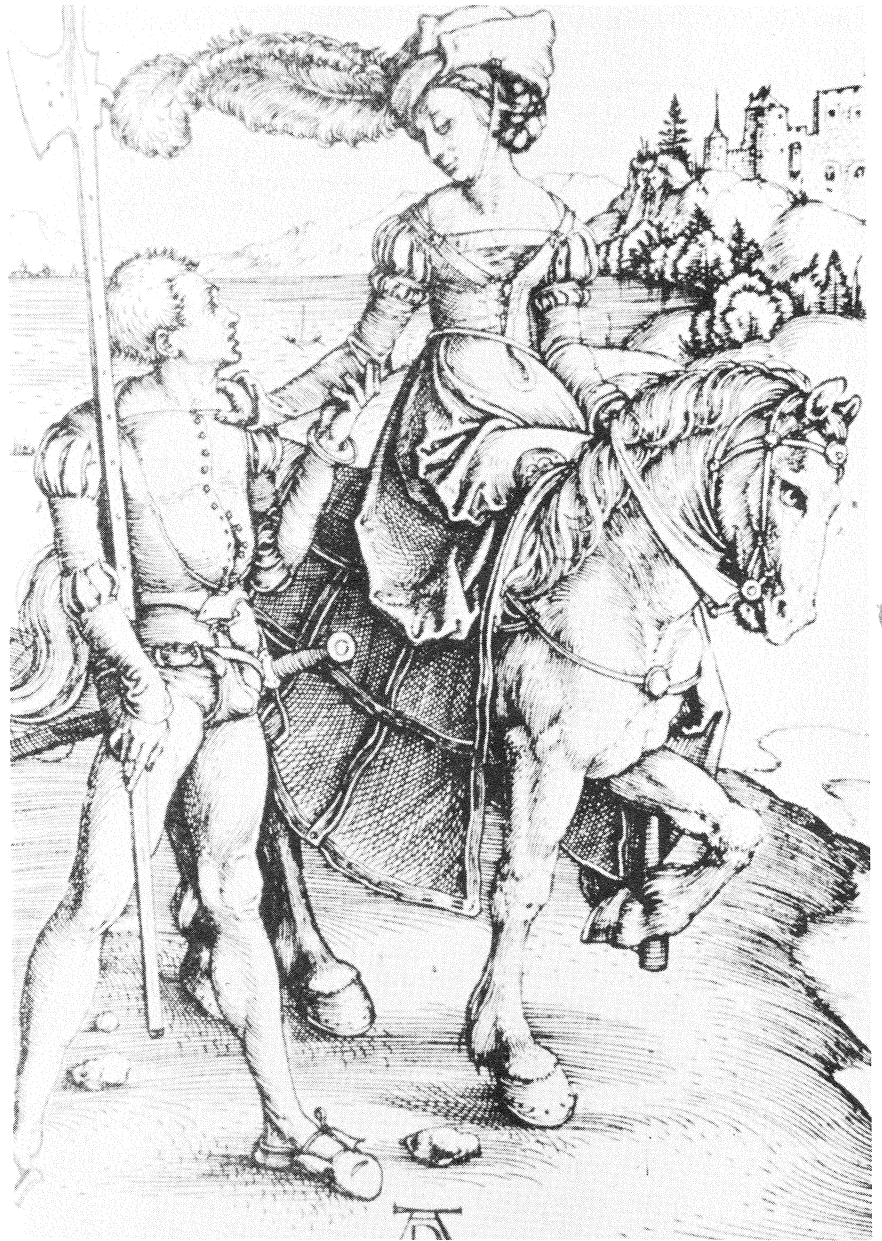


Fig. 7
Lady on horseback with her lansquenet. Engraving by Albrecht Dürer, 1497
Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

been confined to riding only in side-saddle, as we have seen in the previous paragraph, but in the course of the 19th century women became eager to achieve the same performances on horseback as men. The side-saddle with the two crutches gave women a balanced seat instead of the fixed seat on the saddle with three crutches, and on the one with the U-shape pommel. With a balanced seat she had greater rapport with her horse and could apply and adapt the riding techniques she had already developed for riding in cross-saddle. She could also make use of her weight to aid the horse, and the left leg was freer to exercise pressure on the horse. By the end of the 19th

century women had perfected their riding techniques to such a degree that haute école, jumping, hunting and correcting problem horses became possible for them (fig. 9).

It became clear that the horsewoman was no longer satisfied with the passive position she was supposed to maintain in the side-saddle, traditionally and as a result of Victorian convention. Within the limits of the side-saddle she had found ways to develop her art and technique of riding, and eventually reached the level of men riding in the cross-saddle. In fact, her ambition has overcome the tradition of passive riding in side-seat that lasted for about 25 cen-

turies. When we view this development in a historical perspective we can conclude that in the mid-nineteenth century a chapter of female emancipation was written.

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Mr. Commandeur, a "Friend" of the NSL contributed the article on the historical development of the side-seat. Mr. Commandeur resides in The Netherlands and is a noted lecturer on art history.

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Photographs by Frits Berg and Howard Allen.



Fig. 8
Amazon. Watercolor by Theodore Gericault (1791-1824)
Museum Boymano-VanBeuningen, Rotterdam



Fig. 9
The Amazon by Giovanni Boldini (1842-1931)
Galleria d'Arte Moderne, Milan

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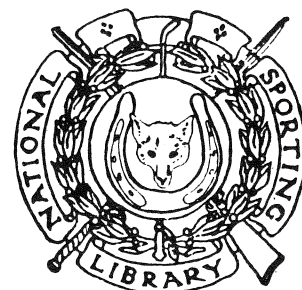
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